

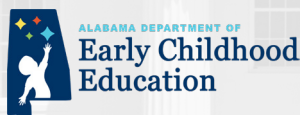
ALABAMA MAYORS LEADING FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

KEY TAKEAWAYS

MEETING 1 - MARCH 30, 2021

The Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education and the Alabama League of Municipalities invited all Alabama Mayors to participate in [*Alabama Mayors Leading for Young Children*](#), a series of virtual convenings focused on mayoral leadership in early childhood education.

The first convening began with an introduction by Dr. Barbara Cooper, Secretary of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, and the Honorable Leigh Dollar, Mayor of Guntersville and President of the Alabama League of Municipalities. Dr. Geoff Nagle, Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences with Tulane University, then offered a presentation behind the brain science. Participants viewed a screening of the film [*Starting at Zero: Reimagining Education in America*](#), which highlights Alabama's First Class Program, followed by a Q&A with Elliot Steinburg, the director of the [*Saul Zaentz Charitable Foundation*](#), and Willa Kammerer, the Director of the film.





THE FIRST 1,100 DAYS LAST FOREVER

PRESENTER:

Dr. Geoff Nagle

KEY TAKEAWAYS

See attached Power Point for additional information.

- Positive experiences will help the brain develop to its fullest potential.
- There are seven major stages of brain development, all of which begin prenatally. The first four are completely formed by the time the child is born.
- When we discuss the “early childhood” period, we are referencing the last three stages:
 - ▶ Cell Connections: connections made across the one billion cells in your brain between the cells.
 - ▶ Synaptic Pruning: pruning of connections not needed/used so you are left with the right connections.
 - ▶ Myelination: how the connections are insulated, the white matter of the brain, so the communication closes between connections.
- You are born with all the brain cells you will have, but then it is about the connections that are made.
- The connections are all dependent on experiences.
- Neural cells connect at a rate of 40,000 per second during the infant years of life.
- At the age of two, a child has more cell connections than at any other point in their life.
- There is a need to streamline in order to get to the right connections. By six years of age, with appropriate experiences, connections are pruned to streamline them. Experiences help the brain decide which connections to keep or prune away.
- As we move into adulthood, we gain life experiences to make use of the neural connections.
- The brain changes its structure and function in response to experience. The brain has neural plasticity, it is adaptable, and can be influenced by positive experiences, such as nurturing and stimulation, and harmed by negative experiences, such as a fearful and stressful environment.
- The brain will adapt and change based on those positive or negative experiences. It is not just the absence of nurture and stimulation, but harm by negative experiences.
- Children do experience stress (dirty diaper, hunger, etc.) and will cry out, but hopefully someone responds to them and soothes them to help them react.
- Too many children experience toxic stress, which is a chronic unrelenting, unrelenting stress. Extreme poverty, with abuse, neglect, mental health issues, substance abuse, and violence are some examples of toxic stress.
- The stresses that are infringing on the child are also infringing on the adult, so the adult may not be able to respond to help that child relax and support the child’s ability to learn how to calm down or relax.
- The body responds to stress-increased heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing rate. When responding to stress, the body also secretes cortisol, the stress hormone diverting resources to respond to the stress while taking resources away from other systems such as the immune system, memory, and attention.
- Children who have chronic, toxic stress may have overactive, reactive, and hyperactive behaviors leading to attention deficit labels. Their stress response system is on alert all the time, and they do not have the ability to bring it down.
- Adults need to be aware what is communicated by a child that is having difficulty regulating themselves, when, in reality, they may just be having an appropriate response to the world they live in.



- There is potential impact for schools relating to how educational achievement is measured and the disparities identified.
- Disparities are not there because of the schools. They are there when the children enter school and often well developed before they enter school, as early as two years of age.
- Disparities are not caused by the schools, but it is because of what happens, or does not happen before children even get to school.
- Schools did not create or exacerbate the gap, but they also did NOT close the gap. Rather than a standard recipe to “educate all,” how do we close the gap for some, while keeping other students steady in their learning progression?
- On average, only half of the local school districts across the country are above the national average of academic achievement.
- If a district can add an additional 14 months extra academic growth, each year for five years, to a student’s progress, that district would be in the top three percent of the country. This shows the difficulty in accelerating the learning process (schools are designed to deliver one academic year at a time).
- Rather than “fixing” the problem at third grade, focus on early childhood efforts to make sure the gap never exists.
- The big question to consider: “If we were to redesign the education system now to meet the innovation we have accomplished in the world, would we still start delivering education at age five?”

POLICY AND PROGRAM OPPORTUNITIES: :

- Intensive focus on prenatal to three (i.e., Early Head Start, Home Visiting).
- Universal pre-K for three- and four-year-old children.
- Quality child care, not just the number of slots.
- Expanded subsidies and tax credits for early childhood education.
- Pay parity between child care and schools (not just pre-K).
- Early childhood mental health services.
- Paid parental leave.

KEY RESOURCES:

- <https://edopportunity.org/>.
- [Establishing Achievable Goals: Recommendations for Improved Goal-Setting Under the Every Student Succeeds Act](#)



Q&A WITH THE DIRECTOR

- What specific action steps can mayors take to support ECE in their communities?
 - ▶ One option is for mayors to work with institutions of education to ensure a high quality early childhood opportunity is available for as many students as possible. Partnerships with local organizations and the business community are key to ensuring access is available for young children. With 70 percent of mothers in the workforce, a high quality early learning experience is key to the continued development of those soft skills for young children. Additionally, supporting workforce development opportunities for early childhood professionals is also important. Institutions of higher education are key to ensuring graduates have the skills necessary to work with young children.
- Resource:** [National League of Cities: Supporting Early Childhood Success Action Kit](#)
- Since Alabama is doing so well, why are student performance disparities within majority minority communities remaining so high?
 - ▶ Unfortunately, there are equity issues throughout the state. Some of the highest need areas are located in areas with limited resources (space available for classrooms, teachers, etc.). The ADECE is making a concentrated effort to reach out to these communities and forge partnerships with the business community to address these gaps. Meetings like today, with outreach to Mayors, is one step in this direction. Children who attend Alabama First Class Pre-K programs are more likely to be proficient in reading and math, less likely to be retained a grade, and less likely to need special education services.

MEETING ONE RESOURCES:

- [Agenda](#)
- [Issue Brief](#)
- [Meeting One Recording](#) / Access Passcode: ALMayors11
- View the film: [Starting at Zero: Reimagining Education in America](#)/Password: SAZfilm

Meeting Two of [Alabama Mayors Leading for Young Children](#) will be held April 27, 2021, with presentations related to mayors leading in early childhood in other cities, small towns, and rural areas across the United States, including Alabama. [Register.](#)